Putting It All On the Tablet

Customers such as 7-Eleven test tablet PC's to improve productivity
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2:10 PM EST Tue. Jan. 21, 2003

Few companies are planning broad rollouts of tablet PCs based on Microsoft Windows XP Tablet Edition,yet. But those that are conducting pilot programs are optimistic about the devices' potential to improve the productivity of their mobile workers, and they say VARs and integrators will play significant roles in many aspects of their deployment, including training and education.

The XP Tablet PC Edition, which Microsoft formally launched in November, goes beyond the typical notebook PC by allowing users to input data with a digital pen or via speech recognition. They can create searchable handwritten documents and convert them into text to use in other applications.

"One of the roles of the integrator is to help us understand how to best take advantage of tablet systems and how they tie in with other products as we try to develop applications," says Kathy Walsh, director of emerging technologies at 7-Eleven, the world's largest operator of convenience stores. "We're looking for a partner to help us deliver these applications to users. We need to make sure people are trained in how to use tablets, and integrators can help."

For their part, integrators and VARs expect tablets,projected to account for just 1.2 percent of worldwide notebook shipments this year, according to Gartner Dataquest,to be deployed mostly in vertical markets with large numbers of mobile workers, such as health care, manufacturing, insurance and retail. For themselves, VARs foresee growing opportunities to develop applications for tablets, particularly in areas such as data collection from the field across those verticals.

"We see potential for tablets, especially in the medical industry," says Dave Kiewra, president of Innovative Systems and Solutions, a Little Falls, N.J.-based systems integrator that wants to help customers adopt and gain a level of confidence in using the technology. "But any mobile workforce could use these for data collection, particularly if they subscribe to wireless Internet access."

Mobility Concepts, a Naperville, Ill.-based solution provider that sells tablet PCs and does integration work for mobile computing, also sees strong opportunities for tablet PCs in industries such as automotive, insurance, food services and airlines.

"The tablet PC will take the Wintel architecture into more diverse areas where users have to stand up or walk while using their devices," says Lou Panetta, vice president of marketing.

In general, those customers testing tablets, including

7-Eleven, say they see the potential for the devices to cut their costs and improve productivity, and that the positive ROI will justify the investment,even in the face of tight budgetary constraints. Here's a closer look at how they're putting the devices through the paces.

Taking Convenience To Heart

Dallas-based 7-Eleven, which has some 5,800 stores in the United States alone, expects to save between $3 million and $5 million annually by equipping field consultants and maintenance crews with tablet PCs. Doing so replaces a more labor-intensive paperwork process that involves filling out lengthy store inventory surveys and rekeying inventory data into a database. As part of Microsoft's rapid-adoption program, the company is using 27 Acer XP tablet PCs, and is considering purchasing additional tablets, likely through VARs.

"We're putting a business case together, developing applications and getting feedback from the field," Walsh says. "It's too early to tell when we'll deploy more tablet PCs, but we're excited about the technology."

In practice, 7-Eleven employees enter data into tablets using digital pens, then upload the information to a main database. From there, the data can be immediately accessed by other maintenance crews and contractors. If a new machine is needed in a store, for example,

all the information is available, including measurements, power supply and plumbing. The data gathered will allow 7-Eleven to create an up-to-date profile of each store.

The smaller size and lighter weight of tablets make them more suitable than notebooks or laptops for gathering data in stores, Walsh says. "When workers are trying to get a model or serial number from a Slurpee machine or a gas tank, there often isn't a place to set a notebook down so they can type in the number," she says. "They can hold a tablet in one hand like a clipboard and input the data using the digital pen."

7-Eleven is also exploring other applications, such as attaching digital cameras to tablets, so a field consultant can take a picture of a broken door hinge, for example, and write comments on the picture with a digital pen. The information could then be sent to a maintenance crew for repair.

Tablets are also expected to boost the productivity of employees who spend many hours in meetings or on the road by letting them take notes and transfering them over a wireless network to desktop systems or to co-workers via e-mail. "They won't have to go through a stack of paper to find notes," Walsh says.

A Consultant's Best Friend

BearingPoint, formerly KPMG Consulting, also sees potential for tablets to boost productivity, estimating its consultants could save 50 hours a year by using them to capture and access information during meetings and while traveling. In turn, that could save millions in compensation.

The company became interested in tablets when it saw the potential they had for its customers, including state agencies.

"They have many workers who are mobile, including people who do field work and inspections," says Jim Sideris, managing director at BearingPoint. "It's suitable for people in the field who use clipboards and forms."

As part of a pilot program, BearingPoint has deployed Fujitsu PC tablets running Microsoft Windows XP Tablet PC Edition to managers, consultants and developers at Harrisburg, Pa., and Austin, Texas, offices.

"I think the tablet PC is a legitimate replacement for the notebook form factor, and there will be a fairly rapid deployment in the consulting industry," Sideris says. "This type of device gives [consultants] the ability to interact based on the pen feature."

BearingPoint, which will likely deploy more tablets as notebooks are replaced in its regular upgrade cycle, also expects workers to use tablets in meetings.

"Using a notebook at meetings to take notes is often considered disruptive and impolite," Sideris says. "But tablets with a pen or stylus is analogous to writing on paper. You can capture notes as pen objects, then convert them to text later if you want. It saves a tremendous amount of time because you don't have to document meetings."

Sideris expects VARs to be key players in the tablet market. "I think there is an opportunity for integrators to help companies deploy tablets in the same ways they do with notebooks," he says. "Any company planning a large deployment of tablets is not going to want to handle configuration issues; they want to be ready to use these things as soon as they're deployed."

An Essential Utility

Allegheny Energy isn't new to the notion of pen-based computing; it has been using WalkAbout pen computers running Windows 95 for five years. But the built-in handwriting-recognition capability of the XP tablets is proving to be a big draw, says Scott Rogers, operations systems technology manager at the Hagerstown, Md.-based electric utility. Earlier this month, the utility rolled out 500 XP Tablet PCs from WalkAbout Computers for its field crews, who will use them for work-management applications, such as reporting on repairs of electrical lines, Rogers says.

The XP feature that lets users rotate the screen for portrait-viewing also makes it easier for workers to take notes in the field, he adds. Allegheny relies on software developers to write the applications.

Educating users about all the capabilities of tablets is also a big part of the process, says Jeffrey Jones, president and CEO of LB Works, a subsidiary of advertising agency Leo Burnett USA. "This machine is not just about handwriting recognition%85the tablet is a fully functional, powerful laptop," he says. "Integrators should be getting people to use these to their full potential."

LB Works is beta-testing XP tablets from Compaq, which are being used by its account management and brand strategy groups to create and share ideas about marketing and ad campaigns.

Tablet Wish List

While all of these early adopters are enthused about tablets, there is room for improvement, they say. 7-Eleven's Walsh, for one, says the devices are ideal for mobile workers, but she'd like to see bigger monitors for creating electronic presentations, and better docking stations.

For his part, BearingPoint's Sideris would like tablets to include technology that lets users wirelessly download digital photos. "It would be great to extend wireless capabilities to devices like digital cameras, which could link up automatically to the tablet," he says.

Another key improvement would be extended battery life, LB Works' Jones says. "When you work in a wireless environment, you forget that you need power," he says. "The big step is from the current three to four hours to five to 10 hours."

Finally, tablets also require the built-in protection that the "ruggedized" WalkAbout tablets possess, Allegheny's Rogers adds. "Our linemen use these more as a tool than a piece of computer hardware," he says. "The people who use these are going to be moving around quite a bit, so you need a level of protection built in."